The Infinite Loops Project - DENN

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The Infinite Loops Project - DENN

by HelenTheMoon

Summary

Part of the Infinite Loops project on Spacebattles.com

In the cosmic supercomputer that is Yggdrasil, anything can happen. Yusaku Fujiki wakes up in a digital imitation of the city he grew up in, seeped with sickness and corruption, all controlled by SOL Technologies. And he, along with Ai, will do anything it takes to get out. But how will his allies on the other side help, when there is a war going on...?

Tags updated as story progresses.

- Inspired by YGO Time Loops by several

Welcome to the Infinite Loops

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!

Welcome to the Infinite Loops, the absolutely *massive* Spacebattles fanfiction community project that encompasses any fandom you could wish for, and in which anyone and everyone can participate!

The Infinite Loops were first conceived by Innortal, an author on fanfiction.net, with his stories about the characters from Ranma 1/2, Bleach, Harry Potter, Sailor Moon, Naruto, Slayers and Neon Genesis Evangelion repeating their lives over and over again.

Later, Saphroneth in Spacebattles found this concept, and recreated the loops, using characters from My Little Pony. Thanks to him, the Infinite Loops project has been revived and going strong for many years, with countless writers and snip complications of hundreds of thousands words.

Which brings us to this fic.

DENN is part of the Yu-Gi-Oh Infinite Loops project, which has two complications on fanfiction.net - on by Leonite on the original anime's page, and one by CeleneTheAngel on the ARC-V page. Please check them out.

In the Spacebattles website, I am known as Lermis. A few of my snips have been posted here by these authors.

So why is this separate? Well, length for one. While usually snips are a few hundred words long each, with some making larger arcs, DENN will be a full-length novel. We agreed with Celene to post it separately. Also, I wanted to take credit for my work, even though the idea of the Loops is not mine. There's a good chance that other writers will contribute to my efforts. Those writers will be credited too.

In this story, Yusaku Fujiki and Ai will have one of the toughest loops in their lives. They have met the loopers from ARC-V before, true. Have talked to them. Dueled with them. But they have never seen it first hand.

And because of the way the loops work, there's no Link Dimension.

Instead there is Link DENN. And Yusaku, along with Ai, must find a way back to reality.

How will their fellow loopers help them when they have an invasion to worry about?

And now for the standard formalities of every loop-based story: **The Loop Mechanics, as explained by Saphroneth.**

One person in a loop, often the main character, is an Anchor. They are the person who first starts time looping. (There may be more anchors per loop for a variety of reasons.)

There is always at least one Anchor present in any given Time Loop snippet, though it may not be the local one.

The standard pattern for a loop is that the Anchor (and whoever else is Looping there) come to awareness in a loop at a particular point in the story. From there, events will play out as influenced by the loopers present, acting with the benefit of their foreknowledge, until either a predetermined end point is reached or all the Loopers have copped it.

To be Awake is to be aware of the time loops (that is, to have gone back in time *this* time.)

The Anchor is the only character guaranteed to be Awake. Even if others have started looping, it is mostly random as to whether they will be Awake this particular loop.

Crossovers, fusions, and alternate pasts can also take place. It is perfectly possible, for example, to have characters Awaken into a loop which conforms to a fanfic universe rather than reality.

There are more rules, but they are community guidelines (please keep point A before point B, for one).

The anchors of ARC-V are Yuya, Yuto, Yuri and Yugo. The anchors for VRAINS are Yusaku and Ai.

Now, please dive in. Welcome to the Infinite Loops.

Welcome to DENN.

PROLOGUE

SYSTEMS ENGAGED
SECURITY PASS
****
CONFIRMED
CONNECTING TO SOLT DATABASE
DOWNLOAD PROFILE #OATM5328333
CONFIRMATION
SCANNING
ERROR
FILE DESIGNATION PAM INCOMPATIBLE
ERROR
ERROR
E-ERROR
EeRROr
eeERroR
E-ERRO-R—R
E---eRR-OooR
E-e-e-ER-r-
eeeeR-
E-eEeeEeee-
---E----
SYSTEM OVERRIDE
CONNECTING TO PROFILE #OATM5328333
...
LINK ESTABLISHED
0100001001000101010001110100100101001110001000000101001101001001010011010101010100111000100000101010100010010010100111101001110

“Wake up.”

Wrong.

CONNECTING SUBJECT #OATM5328333 TO SERVER DENN_3

RENDERING MODEL
00 80 00 , 41 61 E1 , 19 19 70 , FF 00 FF , FF F8 DC

Something was *wrong*, he could feel *numbers running* and those made *sense* but *why*

“Wake up.”

He’s trying.

ERROR
FILE DESIGNATION SP INCOMP-P-P---Pppppp----

SYSTEM OVERRIDE

He was… touching? But no this wasn't *touching it wasn't* real there were number *binary he could read them through his* fingers

0101001001000101010011100100010001000101010100100010000001010100010001010101100001010100010101010101001001000101000010100101001101010100010001010100010101001100
2F 4F 4F , 70 80 90 , 77 88 99

This was a steel beam.

It wasn't real.

INITIATE NEURAL SCANNN—n-nn-nnnN---
ERROR
ERROR
ERRrrrrrrrRRrrRrRrR
SYSTEM OVERRIDE
NEW FILE DESIGNATION LCP DETECTED
SENDER
0100000101000100010011010100100101001110010010010100110101010001010010010000010101010001001111010100100010000001010100010010000100111101010010000

He started feeling other things. His clothes. Him*self*. The wind around him. The cold. He was so high up.

SENDER NOT REGISTERED
INNITIATING SECURITY SYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY-------
SYSTEM OVERRIDE
FILE ACCEPTED
DOWNLOADING TO SERVER DENN_3

The world around him was buzzing. He could feel the signals, the networks and the data. His deck was pulsing with his own pulse, and far away was presence as familiar as it, if not even more so – someone alive and more real than anything.

RENDERING COMPLETE
NO ERRORS DETECTED
…
SYSTEM OVERRIDE
0100000101000100010011010100100101001110010010010100110101010001010010010000010101010001001111010100100010000001010100010010000100111101010010000
DELETE LOGGING DATA

Yusaku Fujiki opened his eyes. Ahead he could see. Spirals of synthesized crystal, armed cement, steel and carbon alloys reached higher than the sky. Solid Vision monitors

illuminating the streets. Neon lines illuminating the constructions themselves rather than placing any obstructing street lights, showering them in all the colours of the rainbow. Strong magnetic fields kept the smooth vehicles afloat. Hustle and bustle far below, voices and music of all kinds.

A beautiful, well constructed, well rendered *lie.*

And he would get OUT.

He sent a Ping.

Far away, and yet so very close, two deceptively young riding duelists stared at the new skyscraper that marred the sky of their City. One that in all the previous loops, all the different versions of their lives they had lived, had never been there.

They recognized the logo all the same. They had seen pictures of it, and even up close once or twice. They knew that it meant very bad news.

"…Shit. You think the others know?"

"Nah, they're not even here."

Suddenly a Ping resounded. A second one immediately after.

Out of pure reflex, Yugo and Rin sent their own. They soaked in the numerous responses.

"You think Yusaku and Ai are in there?" asked Yugo.

Rin nodded. "They definitely are. Let's get the others. We can't possibly deal with this on our own."

"Yeah. Let's get out of here before Security comes."

The two sped up on their D-Wheels, leaving nothing but an empty park behind.

Inside the skyscraper, in the security boardroom, a programmer blinked as the message "Error" popped up in her screen. When she opened her eyes, it was no longer there. She blinked again. Nope. No sign of an error.

She started scrolling up and down, reading each line of code carefully. Ran one more diagnostic just in case. Nothing.

"Status update?"

The head of the department walked in, dressed in a sharp three-piece suit and tie. He was young, but he rose through the rank at an incredible speed, achieving the position of Chief of Security in SOL Technologies in record time, easily overthrowing the previous head.

“Main Server 1 all clear!”

“Sub-servers 1.01 to 1.09 all clear!”

“In-network surveillance, systems A to K, coverage at 97.36 per cent!”

“Improve that one! We need coverage of at least 99 per cent!” He knew that even the slightest short coming could mean an opportunity to someone.

“Yes, sir.”

“Main Server 2 all clear!”

“Sub-servers 2.01 to 2.09 all clear!”

“In-network surveillance, systems M to R, coverage at 98.02 per cent!”

“You work on that too.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Next?”

She wondered if she should say something. About the error she spotted but… There was no hint of it. No anomalies. Nothing. It was eerie.

“Main Server 3, all clear, Mr. Zaizen.”

“Good.”

It was lack of sleep. That was all it was.

“Director! We have detected two suspicious individuals in Tops area 47!”

One could potentially call Jean-Michel Roget a micromanager. It was very much true. His job was like a game of chess after all, carefully detecting the move of each and every piece. As small as a transgression was, he liked the feeling of overseeing it, of reading through it and detecting the moves of the pawns on his carefully constructed chess board.

He turned his attention to the monitors. “Please bring it up.”

The assistant did saw immediately.

Just two brats on D-Wheels. They stood there for a few minutes and then they left. Roget briefly debated what he should do. They were probably long gone by now, but those Commons needed to learn their lesson…

He saw something glinting in the light, and centered the image.

The *bracelet.* This was *it.*

“Interesting. *Very* interesting.”

He loved this job.

CHAPTER 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He could feel the pulse of this place, resonating through his very bones, his mind tracing invisible lines of code, endless zeroes and ones filling in for the natural materials of creation. He could spend days, weeks, even *years* tracing each and every line of code with his finger, admiring how far this imitation came to replacing reality.

Yusaku closed his eyes, and read the streets. Those beautiful, seemingly endless streets. More energy than material, transparent like crystal and pulsing with their own inner light, spreading in lines and curves and loops following the wind itself, heedless of gravity and human limitation.

Inside his mind, Yusaku mapped it out, the highways, and the way they looped in themselves over and over again.

A mobius strip, hiding its true nature with its complexity and grandness. A never ending circle, made to distract. What a glorious lie.

This place is a cocoon…

There was nothing left to admire here. Those streets would lead nowhere.

He turned around and started walking, navigating his way through the scaffolding of the building he awakened in.

“Steel” was what the data said, the colour, the numbers, and Yusaku kept on tracing, trying to match what the numbers were saying with what his eyes were seeing.

The skeleton of this skyscraper, connecting like molecules of an impossible scale, organic in its development, like a modern art statue. The floors were wide and the spaces open – were he to shout in here, his voice would echo back.

He took the stairs.

As he wandered through the shadowed rooms and into the dark corridors, relying more on his Link Sense than sight, Yusaku wondered what this skeleton of a building would be used for. Was it a parking lot? Or maybe an office building? Would it house a museum?

What was he doing here?

His loop memories were- *odd*. Like a block had been placed, stopping him from accessing them.

That was not normal. Not by any stretch. But then again, nothing in this world was normal.

Yusaku was dressed in his casual every-day clothes and yet he was here. In a virtual reality. He had received countless Pings, but in a bizarre way, they all seemed so close and distant. Even Ai.

But Ai was closer. He was somewhere here, in the network, lurking beneath its surface. All Yusaku had to do was *reach out-*

A pulse like static, and he was pushed out again. What in the world…?

After what felt like eternity, Yusaku was finally at street level. Down here, he felt like an ant.

The skyscrapers alone were mind-bending, reaching higher and higher like they wanted to challenge the clouds themselves. To Yusaku it was all a massive flow of energy, with pointed corners and sharp turns. Taking it all in was-

“Hey man, watch where you’re going!”

The pain snapped him out of his trance. A man had collided with him. His face was rough and his expression rougher, and out of habit, Yusaku scanned the man’s profile.

#UAAM1565312

A serial number…? Yusaku had never seen such a thing on a user avatar before. Usually he’d find a username and some profile data.

“HEY punk, I’m talking to you! You want to start something!?”

Oddly aggressive too… “No. Sorry for not paying attention. I was minding my own business. You should do that too.”

“HUH!?”

Yusaku ignored him, and turned around to leave. He should really try to find Ai.

“Watch your mouth you damn punk!”

A pipe!?

Yusaku froze. The man froze with him. Literally.

Out of pure reflex, Yusaku had hacked into the man’s avatar, freezing it in place. He had done it countless times in Link VRAINS. It was far easier to stop the Knights of Hanoi from wrecking havoc when their basic animation programs didn’t work.

Even here, Yusaku’s program was absolute. Not a reflexive twitch in his muscles. Not even his heart was beating. But he was not dead.

Yusaku straightened up, and approached the man. He touched his shoulder, letting his Link Sense take in the code.

It was *fascinating.* Link VRAINS was realistic, but here someone tried to recreate reality as closely as possible. They had even mimicked muscle fibers. He didn't try to read deeper than that though. He doubted his perception could go that deep, and even if it did, no programmer would go as far as to recreate everything on an atomic level.

Would they?

That was an interesting concept. He'd have to examine it when he had free time.

Still, all this coding had a familiar signature. A style he was well accustomed with, even if it was altered by the sheer attention to detail.

Obviously. It made sense. After all, Yusaku would not be able to unleash his animation freezing virus on a completely new system. They had to be compatible.

As gently as he could, he released the pipe from the man's hands, and threw it aside. He then unfroze the man's animation programs.

He collapsed on the ground, breathing heavily. Then he stared at Yusaku like he had seen a monster.

He scrambled away. Yusaku was not about to let him. He froze his animation again, catching the man mid run. He fell on the ground again.

"I only froze your legs, so you should be able to talk. I have a few things to ask you."

The fear was palpable in his voice. "W-wh-what are you!?"

"Don't make things more difficult."

That shut him up. Taking this as "permission" to ask questions, Yusaku kneeled down to his level.

"First; what is this place called?"

The man was so surprised that he actually dropped his guard. "Huh!? Have you lost it?"

"Answer."

"Wow, chill… This is Den City. Seriously, how did you get here without knowing that?"

This was Den City? A feeling of dread started downing in Yusaku's stomach. "How did *you* get here?"

"That's none of your-"

"That's my second question. How did you get in this city?"

"How did I get here, by- By car? No, that's not it… But I was on a road… It wasn't that long ago, was it…? Wait, no…"

He can't remember… Yusaku cut off the man's train of thought before he got even more afraid.

"Never mind. Now for my third question."

The man was still confused, but now that Yusaku cut off his pondering he grew aggressive once more. "What? It'd better not be anything personal. I'll swear I'll-"

"If you try anything funny, I'll freeze you whole again and *leave* you there."

The threat worked as intended. "F-Fine, fine! I'll cooperate. I'll cooperate, just- don't do that again." Yusaku nodded.

"Third question." Yusaku paused, wondering how to put it best. "Who *exactly* runs this place?"

"What!? We're in a fused loop with VRAINS!?"

One of the advantages of being fused into Zarc a few times too many was that now the four co-anchors of the ARC-V branch could talk via telepathy. Yuya and Yuto were chatting with each other over their mind link as soon as the loops started, and had mastered it shortly afterwards. While Yugo and Yuri had greater difficulty than them, they could still come across clearly.

"Are you sure about this, Yugo?"

"Pretty damn sure, Yuto. There's this huge skyscraper smack dab near the Public Security HQ with the SOL Technologies logo on it! There's no way I'd mistake it!"

"Hm… What do your loop memories tell you about this?"

Yugo scowled at Yuri's question, mainly because he did not have a good answer. *"Nothing much. Just that they're doing virtual reality stuff. Rin's weren't much help either. We checked our memories as soon as we Woke up and both saw the name, so we went out to see if it's for real."*

"You went out? Did somebody spot you?"

Yugo thought about it for a moment. *"Probably yeah. Cameras are everywhere. But there's no way they can follow us. We only stayed out in the open for like, a minute. And worse comes to worse, I can always teleport."*

"Huh!?" Yugo could feel Yuya's surprise. *"Yugo, you can travel dimensions with Clear Wing at will now?"*

Yugo smiled proudly, despite knowing the others could not see it. *"Still getting the hang of it, but I'm not half bad! Training with Yusei helped. I can even teleport between different places, not just dimensions! Tried that a couple of loops ago, you should see their faces!"*

"…Wasn't that the loop where Ren was chasing you with a whale around the Duel Palace and you accidentally ended up in the middle of Yuya's duel school while you tried to avoid him?"

"YURI!"

"What?"

"Don't try playing innocent, you know *what you're doing!"*

"Yuri, I think you should drop it…"

"You guys are killjoys" said Yuri, but he dropped it anyway.

Yugo internally let a sigh of relief, and banished all thoughts of Ren from his mind. *"Anyway, now we're meeting up with Crow, and we got to see if anyone else is Awake in this dimension. We'll try to dig up as much info as we can."*

"We should tell the others too. See how many we can gather." General sounds of agreement came with Yuya's statement.

"What about us?"

"Aren't you both busy with the invasion? Besides, we know nothing yet! We can't go making plans out of nowhere!"

"Eh…! You make a surprisingly good point, Fusion!"

"It's YUGO!"

"Hey, do you think Yusaku and Ai are over there too?"

For a moment, they were all silent. *"Yeah. I'm pretty sure two of the pings we got were from these guys. And wherever SOL Technologies is, those two will definitely follow."*

"Good! Then we have a plan!"

"We still have Academia's invasion to worry about" said Yuto, cutting off the briefly positive mood. *"The invasion in Heartland is the same as ever, but things will go differently once Synchro is involved. Yuri, can you do any research from your end?"*

"I don't think so… Roget is a traitorous worm in this loop as well, so any info he has on SOL Technologies wouldn't have made it here."

Yugo and the others took him at his word. The few loops where Roget was still loyal to the Academia were always catastrophic, so Yuri made sure to check first thing.

"At any rate, keep us updated. I got to go now."

"Alright Yuto. Be careful."

"You too. Yuri, as we discussed, right?"

"Right."

The Xyz and Fusion anchors withdrew, probably to exchange more information about the invasion. It had started in Heartland around a month earlier, if his math were right, and as usual Yuto and Yuri were taking advantage of the difficult communications among dimensions to always stay one step ahead from Academia.

"I'll go talk to Reiji as soon as I can. Let's see if we can come to this dimension a bit earlier."

"Dunno if that's a good idea, Yuya. Surveillance here is nuts. Like, worse than usual."

"You think SOL Technologies has something to do with it?"

"Well, I'll find out! Say hi to the others for me, alright?"

"Yep! See you later, Yugo!"

"Bye!"

With that, the last connection in Yugo's head was cut off. He could hear Clear Wing growling with annoyance. "Easy, girl…"

"Are you done, Yugo?" asked a gentle voice behind him.

Rin was not usually the most gentle person in the world, but she knew better than to startle him at moments like this. Yugo was still driving, with Rin riding shotgun, through the streets of the Commons area, attracting a lot of looks as they went. They both got used to that all the way back in baseline. There weren't many people with the means to make a custom D-Wheel, and even fewer their age.

"Yeah. We should get more info about SOL, and Yuya will try talking to Akaba Reiji. Yuto and Yuri can't help, they're busy."

"Figures…" Rin did not try to hide her disappointment, but she recovered quickly. "We should call Crow. See if he can meet up tomorrow. The last thing we need is his pals getting suspicious."

Oh right. Shinji Weber. After Academia, it was Shinji who was the biggest pain in the ass during their loops. Shinji was suspicious of everyone and everything, and would *always* get the Commons to revolt, even if he was somehow killed earlier in the loop. Even in the weird variant where he did not start a revolution, it was because he had *already carried it through.*

Long story short, that guy made everyone's lives harder because he refused to listen to reason, and thought that bombing everything was the best way to get his point across. Making him grow suspicious of Crow this early on would not help in the slightest.

"Let's send a message to both Jack and Crow. They'll read it and answer when they can that way."

Rin nodded in agreement. “Let’s head back to the orphanage. It’s pretty late, and Ms. Akane must be worried.”

“She knows we can take care of ourselves” argued Yugo.

“Yugo.”

“Yeah?”

“You just want to ride around more, don’t you.”

“Heheh…”

She sighed in exasperation, and leaned in to whisper in his ear. “There’s surveillance you know! Roget is looking for us both!”

“Fine, let’s head back.”

The fancier the apartment was, the colder it felt. Especially if you were alone in it. Zaizen Akira had found out the hard way.

And right now, the luxury apartment at the Tops residential area felt very cold indeed.

Akira only bothered with opening the light of the entrance, letting the city lights come through the glass panels and illuminate the rest of the space. From his window he had clear view of the City Windmills – the glowing rows of white floating parallelepipeds that went on and on. Another way to produce energy for the City, they said. Even in the Commons area, as long as one had access to some half-decent wiring, they would always have electricity. Blackouts were a foreign concept in this world, had been for many years now.

Akira was grateful for that power.

He checked his phone for messages. Around ten or so were from Kitamura, going on and on about the shortcomings of the surveillance system in server 1 again. Akira hated reading them as closely as he did, but the man was after his position in the company like a starved snake. He could be extremely unpredictable.

The rest were more impersonal. A few formalities about the job again, and an invitation to a company gala next weekend. He’d have to check his schedule to see if it could fit. He did not like going into those either, but it was always good to know the competition.

He checked the last message. The same as always.

He should really expect it by now. He never did.

He left his phone on the table and carelessly threw his suit jacket at a corner. Later, he would regret messing with its folding like this, but right now he was too exhausted to care. He was always exhausted. A thing that went deep into his bones.

He grabbed the cold leftover lasagna from the fridge and ate half-heartedly. He left the plate on the table for his maid-bot to pick later.

For a while, he stood in front of the bedroom door. But it was pointless.

So he just watched the Windmills.

“Any sign of them?”

“No, sir!”

“Sector T320 is clear! No sign of them!”

“This is Beta squad! No sign of them!”

“Keep looking! They can’t just *vanish*!”

The Security goons had been scanning the streets for hours now, looking for who knows what, sticking to the streets and looking for marks on the asphalt.

Normally, Shinji Weber would not be in the dark about this. If any of his fellow Commons did anything to attract the Security’s attention in one way or another. Shinji was always the first one to know. He had made it his business.

Which is why not knowing troubled him.

He and his friends were hiding deep in the shadows for at least three minutes now. That was practically eternity. They barely even breathed. As much as Shinji would like to take them on, he knew that right now it was hopeless.

Finally, at long last, the security cleared, finding some other path to haunt. Or they received an order. Either way worked.

Now, they were allowed to breathe.

“Who do you think they were after?”

“A D-Wheel, probably? They were looking for tire marks.”

“But if they were chasing a D-Wheel, wouldn’t they show it on TV?”

“Maybe there was no chase.”

“That’s impossible man! Nobody escapes Security like that!”

Shinji interrupted them both. “Pondering this stuff won’t help right now! We have to get back to Crow.”

The other two nodded in agreement, and they all headed to Crow’s house.

Look up everything we can find on SOL Technologies, huh? That does sound like our only lead to finding Yusaku and Ai…

Crow was less than happy about the sudden fused loop. He had always figured that if they ever had a fused loop with VRAINS, Yusaku and Ai would loop in Standard, or there'd be a Link Dimension or they'd all end up dueling in VR or something.

Nope. The only lead they had was SOL Technologies getting in the way of the horizon like literally every other skyscraper in this damned City.

Crow had a bit of a love-hate relationship with the City. For instance, the three guys who had just walked in.

"Shinji! Simon! Tony! What are you here doing at this hour? The kids are asleep, you know."

"Sorry Crow" said Damon. "I hope we're not bothering you."

"Don't worry, I was just tidying up a bit." *And reading text messages sent by my fellow loopers on a phone I'm not supposed to have.* "Did something happen?"

"Yeah…"

"Security is scanning the streets for a D-Wheel all of a sudden" said Shinji. "It's not like them not to televise that stuff."

Crow was willing to bet his dragon that the D-Wheel belonged to Yugo and Rin. "Maybe they spotted them on a security camera or something?"

"Could be…"

"Still, we need to find them and help them!"

Hoo boy. Not this argument again. "Shinji, do you know when the Security started looking for that D-Wheel?"

"Two or three hours ago, I think. That's when we first saw those crooks."

"If whoever has that D-Wheel managed to dodge Security for three hours, don't you think they might *not* need help?"

Shinji scowled. "Even if that's the case, we still need to find them!"

A sudden knock came from the bedroom, and the four duelists collectively froze. Shit, they probably woke up the kids.

Crow lowered his voice to a stage whisper. "Listen Shinji, and the rest of you guys. Right now it's late, we have no idea who security is chasing and why, and they have a ton of people out there. We go out there right now, we'll only end up in jail. Save it for tomorrow, okay? I don't want to leave the kids alone in the middle of the night."

Shinji looked conflicted, but eventually amended. “We’ll come by tomorrow.”

Crow successfully hid his sigh of relief. “Be careful out there, guys.”

“You got it, Crow!”

And just as fast as they came, the three duelists left.

This City. This goddamned City. How Yugo and Rin managed to live with this as their baseline and come out as decent and mostly normal people was anyone’s guess.

Shinji is going to keep pestering me about those two… I’d better send them a message.

Crow knew that his baseline self was good friends with the man, and indeed, his heart was in the right place. But the looping version of Crow, who had seen different versions of his home go down to hell over and over again, who had seen different worlds unlike anything, could not bring himself to like the guy who inevitably brought chaos.

Crow pulled his phone out of his Pocket again and sent Yugo and Rin a text message. *“Shinji is looking for you guys. To rescue you or recruit you not sure.”*

A few minutes later came an answer. *“Huh? How does he know about us?”* Rin must have forced Yugo to use autocorrect.

“That’s not it, he saw the Security looking for a D-Wheel. Pretty sure that’s you.”

“Not surprised.”

“Jack should send his stuff tomorrow. I’ll try to calm Shinji down by then.”

“Good luck!” Crow made a face.

“Yeah. You guys be careful.”

“Gotcha.”

Tomorrow was going to be a long day.

Five hours after the initial sighting, Roger was forced to call off the security. They would not find anyone at this rate. However, the… side results were quite satisfying. At the sight of security, all the little worms had gone into hiding, leaving those sorry streets blissfully empty for once. Maybe the occasional show of power would be beneficial in the long run.

He would need more pawns though. That little street scan had the unfortunate side effect of leaving the Tops area unguarded. An increase in personnel would be necessary to maintain an even level of surveillance.

Of course, the contract he had made with SOL Technologies worked out wonderfully.

SOL Technologies was the leading expert in both software and hardware. While their focus on computing systems was rather unusual, given the City's more mechanical approach to technology, it gave him the bleeding edge in terms of surveillance and coverage.

The only disadvantage, if one could call it that, was their tendency to buy off criminal records. Why they would bother to load themselves with scum like that was a mystery, but not one he was in any hurry to solve. Eventually, SOL Technologies would also become a stepping stone for his grand plan.

He just had to find the girl.

It had been hours since Yusaku told the man to scram and keep his mouth shut. He hoped he'd oblige. That was not Yusaku's most well thought out plan.

First; this virtual reality is a variant imitation of Den City from my baseline.

Second; the residents are incapable of recalling how they arrived at this place.

Third; the company who runs it is SOL Technologies.

Conclusions:

First; there is no guarantee that Den City exists in the real world.

Second; all the residents or a majority of those are unaware that this space is virtual.

Third; even in this variant, SOL Technologies specializes in virtual reality software.

He did not like where his observations were leading him. Someone out there had to be gathering people and placing them here against their will. Which suggested far more sinister intentions that the company ever had in baseline.

His own serial number read *#OATM5328333.* They had to stand for something. There were common points between his code and the one from the man earlier.

He had to reunite with Ai.

He tried to reach out with his Link Sense again. This time he received a push back. Yusaku nearly felt his heart flood with relief. But there was still a barrier between them.

Yusaku was not wandering around lost now. He had a destination. For all its differences, the basic layout of Den City was still the same.

He arrived at the Charisma Square without issues. The gigantic monitors – Solid Vision projections here instead of being regular LED screens – were showing ads of various products that Yusaku had a passing familiarity with.

As expected, the square was packed. Everyone was jittery and excited. But there was something… *off* with the crowd.

Most children and teens were alone… The adults were almost pack-like, gathering in small groups close to each other.

Ai was so close he could feel him in his heart. But there was still a barrier. One Yusaku recognized all too well, even if his side of the equation was different than usual.

“Hello. Are you new here?”

The voice was vaguely familiar. Yusaku turned around and nearly had a heart attack. It was Café Nagi.

Kusanagi-san’s old hot dog truck. Standing there like a mockery of this entire place, identical to the one he spent all his days in his baseline, complete with the cheap plastic tables and chairs. But the person standing there was not Kusanagi Shoichi.

It was Jin.

It was a punch in the gut.

Jin? He’s here? How is he here? Where is Kusanagi-san? Is he okay? Is JIN okay why is he here did nothing happen to him or no he’s trapped where’s Kusanagi-san did something happen to him too again no-

“Hello! Earth to Mr. Tall, Dark and Handsome!”

“H-Huh?”

Jin was still there. Kusanagi-san was not.

“You seemed really out of it. I called you out a few times. Are you okay?”

Jin was asking *Yusaku* if he’s okay. This had to be some sick joke.

“I-I’m fine. Sorry.” What should he do? Ai…

“You’re new in this city, aren’t you?”

Yusaku looked at Jin in surprise again, but a different kind. “Sort of. How can you tell?”

Jin smiled. It was a small, sincere thing. “You have that look in your face, like you’re uncomfortable with everything.”

“I guess…” He was disoriented. The fact that he could feel the construct of literally everything around him was not helping.

“But you also look like you’re here on business. Are you looking for someone?”

Maybe… “Yeah, a friend. I’m not sure if he’s in this crowd though.”

Jin was thoughtful. “Well, if he’s not in the crowd, maybe he’s logged into Link VRAINS? There’ll be a double Charisma duel in half an hour or so, so he’s probably logged in to grab a

good seat. At least that's what I would have done."

Yusaku's suspicions were confirmed. Link VRAINS. Here. Somebody made a virtual reality *inside the virtual reality*. Just what was their goal?

"Thanks." This was so surreal…

Yusaku checked Jin's serial number. *#OATM6541354*

The same initials as his own.

"I'll find a place to log in. Have a good night."

"Yeah, you too! Oh, wait!"

"Something wrong?" What could he want?

Jin was throwing him a weird look again. "You… don't have a duel disk."

Yusaku smiled. "I don't need one."

Jin blinked exactly once. "Huh?"

"I have my ways."

The purple-haired boy laughed. In all the loops, Yusaku had barely heard him make a sound, so this… This was novel. "Oooh, the mysterious type! Well, I'll take your word for it! There's a quiet corner right behind the trash bins, nobody bothers to look there."

So no specialized linking chamber here. He could work with that.

Yusaku thanked Jin and ran to the shadowed corner where he had pointed, making sure that it really was as empty as he claimed. Honestly, it was a pretty good hiding spot, especially for a place so public. In the distance, he could see him prepping hot dogs. Yusaku briefly wondered if food was really necessary here.

He closed his eyes and concentrated. The process was familiar and comforting.

"Into the VRAINS." He no longer needed a duel disk to do it. His Link Sense alone was enough.

When he opened his eyes, the scenery had transformed.

The futuristic skyscrapers had been replaced by a stone-paved plaza littered with small stores left and right. Trees – and element completely absent in the world of the other simulation – lined the streets, providing their shade to the happy bystanders who gathered all around.

Yusaku looked at his hands and confirmed that he was in his Playmaker guise. The people here were much the same, dressed in all colours and costumes; knights, robots, fairies,

animals and all sorts of intricate clothes. There were more people here than there were at the Charisma Plaza.

And more importantly, the crowds here seemed… normal. No weird gatherings. No children too young to be left alone wandering around.

The difference was so jarring that it made his head spin. Despite the world outside, Link VRAINS here looked exactly the way it did after SOL Technologies fixed it post the Hanoi Incident. Just what was happening?

Playmaker was about to send another signal to Ai, but he was cut off by another voice calling at him.

"Young man?"

Young man? "Yes?"

The avatar that greeted him was unlike anything he expected. It was a normal old man in his pajamas. Definitely not what one would find in Link VRAINS. Yusaku went to scan him, fully expecting a serial number, but instead he got normal profile data. A normal name – Mamoru-ojisan – joined Link VRAINS four years earlier, no duels recorded. The serial number was probably hidden beneath that.

"You are new here in Link VRAINS, aren't you young man?"

"Uh, yes." Playmaker was at a loss. He had no idea how to deal with this.

"I see, I see… Everybody here is new, you know. All those kids and youngsters… This place was very quiet once! And nowhere as big!"

"I see… Have you been here for long?" Playmaker settled for politeness.

"Yes, yes… Four years. Funny thing, I don't really remember how I got here."

He doesn't remember? Is that his age… or that other thing? "You mean, in Den City?"

The old man smiled mischievously. "You catch on quickly! How did *you* get here?"

Playmaker thought about it for a few moments. "I don't know how I arrived at this city either" he answered honestly. "But I'm trying to find a friend of mine."

For the first time, the old man looked astonished. "A friend? You have a *friend* here?"

"Yes. I need to find him."

"Are you *sure* he's here?"

What does he want? Playmaker scanned him again, diving deeper. Normally, finding the connection between the avatar and its user would harder than that. But here, everything was digital. *#OAEM1607100*

Playmaker filed it away for later.

“I’m sure. He sent me a message earlier.” Well, a Ping and a Link Sense signal.

“Oh. Well then, good luck finding your friend! And in everything else, I hope.”

Everything else? “…May I ask you something?”

The old man stared at him for a moment. “What is it, young man?”

“Why did you want to talk to me? Like you said, I just arrived here.”

“You know, young man… My memory may not be the best – blame my old age for it – but from the day I arrived at Den City onwards, I remember everything like yesterday. And you’re the first newcomer here who doesn’t look lost.”

This… This was great information. This could prove to be very useful information.

“Thank you” said Yusaku, more sincerely than he had in a while.

“Come by here now and then, alright? I don’t have anyone to talk to.”

Playmaker was far from a social butterfly. But not to have *anyone*… “I’ll try.”

The old man smiled sadly. “That’s all I’m asking. What’s your name?”

“…Playmaker.”

He snorted. “Fancy. Well, I’m Mamoru. You can call me ojisan if you like. Well then, good luck!”

Playmaker nodded, and left the bench. He found another mostly empty corner, and sent another signal.

Ai? I’m here.

About time.

His eyes snapped open. He looked at the wall.

There he was. The eyeball.

In a flash, it was a man. One that Playmaker – that Yusaku – knew all too well.

“Ai.”

He looked up and saw his co-anchor, his partner, smile down at him. “Playmaker.”

The gentle hug was not completely unexpected. In human form, Ai towered over Yusaku by a full head. Yusaku leaned into it, taking in the intricate lines of data that were exclusively *Ai.*

“This is bad, Ai. Did you see this world? Even the people here are wrong.”

“Yeah, I saw it. We’ll get out of here. I promise.”

That was good enough.

Chapter End Notes

Here's the first chapter! I don't know when I'll update next, but there will be an update. Don't be afraid to ask any questions, or leave a review. I love reviews. Btw, that Ren guy is not an OC.

CHAPTER 2

Chapter Notes

Special credit to spacebattles users:
KettouRyuujin for original duel outline and input in card making.
krspaceT for input in card making.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As usual, the world was screaming.

The ground was shaking, and the land was torn open, revealing the flames of hell that burned beneath. The sky was covered in ash and smoke and the light of the sun would never shine through again.

The shards of glass were shining like tiny stars against the flames, dozens of colours glittering in the dark. Odd how the human mind could find beauty in anything.

"Maybe it's a coping mechanism?"

He ran as fast as he could, staying low, half-hidden behind the wrecks of the once gorgeous buildings. He caught sight of a sign with an ice cream on it. Was that the place they used to hang out in? He couldn't remember.

"That's to be expected. Don't get sentimental over ice cream now, you have a job to do."

A shard of glass was caught in his hand, but he removed it with practiced ease. A mere thought was all it took for it to be healed – he could not afford to shed blood on his cards.

"The wonders of Real Solid Vision."

Indeed… Telling what was real and what was Real Solid Vision was hard… especially when thinking of himself.

"Interesting line of thought but pretty useless."

He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts.

"Yuto."

The Anchor of the Xyz Dimension turned to his best friend. Shun's face was hidden beneath his sunglasses and his mask, but then again, so was his.

A flash of light, different than the flames, caught their attention. Just a couple of blocks away, a cold and harsh explosion in the colours of the rainbow was followed by the roar of a dragon.

Kaito was always going for his Cipher deck in these loops. He said that his Photon deck was too specialized to deal with the Academia, designed to fight against the Numbers as it was. That was true, but it was only half the reason. This baseline had done weird things in Kaito's head, though they'd rarely talk about it.

Kaito was currently standing vanguard against a small army of Obelisk Force soldiers. Yuto was not worried about him. Even in baseline, Kaito had proven more than capable of taking them on. With the loops, and his previous experience in the ZEXAL branch, these guys were a joke.

Besides, Kaito was only here as a distraction. Shun and Yuto had another job.

"Are you there yet?"

"In a few."

With the light show before them, no soldier noticed the two dark figures sneaking behind the shadows.

Finally their destination came in sight. Now it was time for the hard part.

Yuto and Shun had been tasked with locating the main Academia base, and doing as much damage as possible.

Razing the place to the ground would be child's play for a fragment of a self-made god of destruction and the walking armory. Really, that was all that their mission entailed – destroy the base so that Academia cannot deploy more soldiers.

The loopers had something more complicated in mind.

Shun carefully scanned the area with his Duel Disk. "Lots of security here. There is camera coverage in full range around the compound, overseeing both the inner and outer sides of the deploying grounds. There is also some coverage over the building, probably for aerial attacks. I'm pretty sure those are missiles…"

Sure enough, a long row of missiles generated by the Antique Gear cards were placed in the rooftop of the dome-like base.

That was to be expected. Normally, the Fusion Dimension did not go that far in terms of surveillance, but thanks to the combined efforts of the local loopers, the Resistance still held too strong for their liking.

Yuto smiled, though there was only but the tiniest sliver of humour in it. "Preparation for aerial attacks and missiles? Looks like your reputation precedes you, Shun."

Shun scowled at him. "You'll never let me live that down, will you?"

“Shun, you blew up a stadium from orbit in *baseline*.”

“It’s the only way to be sure.”

Yuto did not have anything to say to that. This time, Shun was *told* to go overboard, and for the sake of their plan, Yuto had agreed to it. Besides, Shun’s coping mechanism was by no means the worst he’s heard of.

“Kurosaki’s coping mechanism consists of mass destruction and sometimes lots of irrational screaming.”

“The screaming is fun though.”

“That’s not what you usually say.”

“At any rate, an aerial infiltration is not an option.”

Shun nodded, annoyance clear as day on his face. “Cards?”

Yuto knew what his friend was thinking. They could use Phantom Fog Blade to fill the whole area with mist and sneak in with that. Normally that would work – the wind combined with the dust and the ash made for horrendous visibility, so freakish mists were pretty common.

The birds that died from the ash… Ruri had cherished them…

“Around here, if we play any card, they’ll detect it. Better go with another option.”

“Camouflage spell then.”

“On it.”

Yuto reached for his Pocket and pulled his wand – ebony and, unsurprisingly, dragon heartstring. Hogwarts loops always had something useful to offer. “It’s not true invisibility” he warned Shun, even though he already knew the drill. “We have to walk slowly and steadily so that the cameras won’t pick any anomalies.”

“I know” said Shun, but he did not call out Yuto on the reminder. Instead, he turned off the scanner and made a call.

“We’re going in. Get ready.”

A female voice replied. *“Alright, brother. Please be careful.”*

“We will.”

Ruri readied her duel disk, once again inspecting it for damage. Other than the typical scratches on the paint here and there it was spotless. Good. Once again, she inspected her deck, before pulling out a single card.

Getting new cards in the loops – specialized, overpowered cards – was far from a problem. However, making a new card the traditional way…

Well, as traditional as Akaba Reiji can get, at any rate.

Well, making cards the traditional way required a lot of attention to detail. There was the problem of what kind of card you wanted it to be, in what situations it's applicable, and whether you want it to be balanced or not. And then there was testing. Lots and *lots* of testing.

She had been asked to test this card. In fact, just about every ARC-V looper had been given a copy of this card along with a checklist of what tests are to be performed. She did not know if she would actually use it – her brother definitely wouldn't, seeing how badly it clashed with his strategy – but adding it in… That wouldn't be such a bad idea.

Once again she inspected her deck, deciding it was good enough.

There was more to this than testing a card. She had another mission to carry out.

Dodging Sayaka and Allen was easy – all she had to do was pretend that she would go refill the water. It was not even a lie, she really did have to refill the water.

Canteen in hand, she stood in line waiting. There she saw him by the corner of her eye. He was waiting just like she was.

The one he was waiting for would never arrive.

Instead Ruri turned around and waved at him. Startled, he waved back. She chuckled under her breath. *You didn't expect to be spotted, did you?*

She jogged to the spot he was standing, bucket forgotten. Somebody would pick it up later. This was more important.

"Hello, Dennis."

The tall entertainer blinked at her and smiled. "Ruri! I didn't expect to see you today! I thought you'd be out there fighting?"

Dennis, what a charming liar. Good enough to lie to himself and believe it.

"No, we never send everyone! Someone has to stay behind and guard the camp, right?" That was true. Divide and conquer was one thing, but leaving the base unguarded was suicide. Even with their three strongest duelists out, the refugee camp was filled to the brim with teens and young adults carrying battered duel disks and wearing red scarves.

"I guess that's true…" said Dennis. He hid it well – *very* well – but he was sweating a little. Now was the time.

"Dennis, can I talk to you a little? Elsewhere?"

"Huh?"

The sky was dark but clear, the moonlight shining through the curtains of his window – the stars were invisible though, hidden as they were by the city lights. The house was eerily quiet save for the soft snores coming from the bedrooms and the ever present buzzing of the fridge.

No sane person would make a phone call at this hour.

But Sakaki Yuya was used to keeping busy at odd hours.

Taking care not to wake up his many pets, he opened his window as silently as he could and climbed out of the window, up to the roof of his house. With his acrobatic skills it was easy.

Making sure that nobody was around to wonder what in the world was Sakaki Yuya doing in his pajamas on a roof in the middle of the night, he took out his duel disk and waited for the call to connect.

Come on, pick up… I know you're not sleeping…

"Yuya. What happened?"

Yuya nearly collapsed with relief. He got straight to the point. "I heard from Yugo and Rin a few hours ago – we're in a Fused Loop with VRAINS. SOL Technologies appeared in the Synchro Dimension."

Reiji was silent for a moment. *"So that's what the two extra Pings were… They must belong to Fujiki Yusaku and Ai."*

"That's what we figured" said Yuya. "But we didn't find any sign of them. Yugo said that SOL Technologies is doing something with virtual reality technology, but he doesn't know anything more than that. They're looking into it now."

"I see. Keep me updated on that."

"I will. Oh, and Yugo said that the surveillance in the City is even more thorough than usual. We think that SOL Technologies may have something to do with it."

"That would be the logical conclusion. However, if there is such a connection, it would mean that the Security Bureau is connected with SOL Technologies."

Yuya shivered, and it was not from the late night chill. Roger and SOL working together… "If they look into this too deeply, the Security will probably go after them…"

"We cannot afford to have any loopers in the City captured. Tell them to proceed with outmost caution."

"Will do. But Yugo says he can now teleport out of there…"

"Oh? So he finally mastered Clear Wing's power?"

“That’s what he said. He still has a few hiccups though…”

“I see. That would be beneficial. I’ll have him on call from now on.”

In another life, a long time ago, Yuya would have argued against this. *Strongly*. However, a lot of stuff had happened since then. “I’ll tell him when he’s up.”

“Anything else?”

Yuya thought about it for a moment. “I think… the loopers in Fusion and Xyz are planning something big, but I have no idea what. Yuto and Yuri sounded like they’ve been planning it for a while now.”

Reiji was silent for a while. *“Yet they did not share the details with you?”*

“No… Yugo doesn’t know either. I don’t think he realized there *is* a plan. But he’s pretty rattled by the SOL thing, so…”

“Be sure to find out as soon as possible.”

He did not have to be ordered. “Got it.”

“By the way, Yuya…”

“Yes?”

“Are you planning on revealing Pendulum to the general public?”

Yuya scowled. *That* conversation… “Yuto and Yuri told me to hold it off for this loop.”

“...Interesting…”

“Yeah, that’s *one* way of putting it.” In fact, that was what first clued him that his two fellow co-anchors were up to something.

“Perhaps they wish to withhold the existence of Pendulum from the Academia?”

“Could be…” Yuya shook his head. He almost forgot to ask. “Do you think we can go to Synchro early?”

“To deal with SOL Technologies? At this stage, we do not have enough information, and we’re hardly prepared.”

“So that’s a no…” Yuya stifled a yawn.

“It’s late. I assume you have shared all this with Hiiragi Yuzu and Gongenzaka?”

A dismissal, if he ever heard one. But it *was* pretty late. “Yeah, as soon as I heard. I just – you know, I can’t call you out in the open.” After all, Yuya and Reiji were not supposed to know each other this early in baseline.

“Understood. Goodnight then.”

“Yeah, goodnight.”

The call disconnected. Yuya felt exhausted but somehow he felt better too.

Ever since Reiji stopped his Stealth Looping, their lives got so much easier. He could act in the open now. Sure, he was not always Awake, and half the Lancers were not even loopers to begin with, but being completely honest with at least one person in the group was a huge improvement.

And Reiji was a man of many means, and a man of his word. If he promised something, it was as good as done. With all those insane loops they had over time, Yuya could do with a little stability. They all could.

His thoughts went back to his counterparts. They more than anyone could use some stability right now.

Be careful, guys.

He climbed back into his room, uncertain if he would be able to sleep.

Reaching the main gate was easy. Getting in the base was another thing entirely.

They were partially prepared; several loops ago, Yuya had used the technical skill he had acquired as Phantom to make a device that could trick surveillance systems. Yuya called it a “simple” gadget that made the cameras record looping footage, but honestly? Yuto did not understand that stuff.

Prior to the loops, Allen was their tech guy. After the loops, Yugo and Yuya became their tech guys. Akaba Reiji was a recent addition. Yuto was by no means hopeless with tech but he simply was not at that level.

The point was, with the cameras successfully jammed, Yuto and Shun could talk freely.

They had done such things so many times already that they no longer needed signals. Shun activated his duel disk again, this time switching to thermal vision. Yuto peeped over his shoulder. Several people, sitting.

“Scientists.”

“Yeah.”

Nothing out of the ordinary. Academia always had anywhere between twenty and fifty scientists working on various things in their bases at all times. With a passing glance Yuto could tell that this time there were around thirty people in there.

And of course, patrols.

“Three on ground level… Two standing guard in the main generator room… Two more to Edo’s office, nobody inside… The rest are at random spots, I guess doors. Three squads on standby… Can’t spot anyone else.”

Yuto scowled. Edo Phoenix. Originally from the GX branch, made several connections and close friends in both branches… And somehow, he was still not looping.

Yuma complained about it too – the guy who was his closest friend before the loops never started looping. Several other loopers from all their branches made similar complaints. Just-*why?*

“Stop thinking about these things, Yuto. If Edo opposes you, you deal with it. Plain and simple, no? Stick to the plan.”

Yuto took a deep breath. Right. They had a plan.

“Thanks, Yuri.”

He could feel the smugness radiating from the other in waves. *“Oh~? That’s very sweet of you, Yuto-chan~”*

“Don’t you *have a job to do?”*

“Yes. Wait for you to do yours.”

Yuto sighed. He had a point.

“Yuto?” The black-haired anchor was startled back to reality.

“Yeah, sorry. Just-”

Shun nodded, effectively dropping the subject before they even picked it up. “Anyway, if we burst in from here, we’ll get spotted.”

“True. Did you find any air ducts?”

Shun shook his head. “Even if there are any, they’ll probably have air filtering systems in place. We’ll have to get through those.”

Another standard practice during the war – get to the place with the least ash and dust. The Resistance would always set camp either at the central dueling stadium which was protected by its glass dome, or in the shrine up the mountain that was simply too high for the destruction to reach it. In this loop they had a secondary base there, mostly to manage communications and hide resources.

Wait…

“Maybe we could… smoke them out…”

Shun caught on to his meaning quickly. “Cause a malfunction in the air ducts and force everyone out of the base? It could work.”

“Just don’t make the smoke too *lethal.”*

Yuto could not hold back the sarcastic response. *“Only enough to make them suffer like a thousand knives are stabbed in their chests?”*

“You’re learning!” Typical Yuri.

So now they had a plan in place. Good. *“Yuri, your turn.”*

“Understood. Then I’ll tell the others. See ya.”

To say that they were winging it would be an understatement. Okay, so Sora understood the general concept of the plan. It was a good concept, all things considered and if it succeeded, they would get rid of some major pains in the ass for everyone.

Except that this was a *very big* “if”.

Because, well, the “plan” was more like “general outline of a plan that starts with the problem and ends with potentially solving it, with a rather vague in-between stage”. To be fair, Sora had previously rushed into situations with even *less* of a plan than that – his old baseline idea to stalk Akaba Reiji by hanging around LDS came to mind – but here there was the very real risk that he and everyone involved would get *caught*.

Not to mention that the overall plan was very dependent on timing and so the lack of a precise outline was even *more* of a risk factor.

Sora was not in the mood to get turned into a card, thank you very much.

A message came to his duel disk. His *real* duel disk. A while back, everyone had gotten You Show Fusion-style duel disks, which he was told looked a lot like the ones the GX loopers used. Sora found that he quite liked the design.

The pony-tailed looper pulled it out of his pocket and checked it.

“Get into position.”

Yuri. Great.

Sora’s job was essentially to clear the way for the others to come through, while making it look like Yuri was uninvolved. Eventually Yuri would get ordered to go after them, at which point the pink-haired anchor would grab the chance to bail it.

The inevitable fallout of all that… Best case scenario, Academia was crippled. Worst case scenario, they would tear apart the rest of the dimensions to find them.

However, that is a risk I must be prepared to take!

Sora put the disk back in his Pocket, prepared for the worst and headed to the central building.

They were finally secluded enough. Once upon a time, this place was tiny park in between some tiny houses each with their own garden – a tiny taste of the suburbs in the middle of Heartland.

Nothing lived now. Just some wild weeds and moss were growing through the concrete and the debris. Overall, it made for a decent dueling area; hidden from outside, but with enough space.

Ruri wondered if Dennis could tell what was on her mind.

“So, Ruri, what did you want to talk about?”

He’s definitely panicking now… She wondered how she should approach this. “Dennis, you are a pretty good duelist… Why aren’t you fighting with the Resistance?”

Dennis raised his hands defensively in what would otherwise be a disarming gesture. “Oh, I couldn’t! Fighting seriously like that is not my style at all. You can’t do entertainment when nobody’s having fun!”

“But you can *make* them have fun, can’t you?”

“Huh?”

Ruri looked at his straight in the eye. “If the Academia duelists never see what a true duel looks like, how will they learn that it’s not a weapon?”

Dennis looked at her incredulously. “Not a weapon? But… there’s a lot of damage in the city…”

“That’s because they’re using it wrong. Dueling is not a tool for destruction.”

“Maybe you should try telling that to your brother? I heard he carpet-bombed about four different Academia bases the other day.”

There was an entirely different nervous hinge here. Shun had gone above and beyond in this loop with the “absolute annihilation” aspect of his deck. It was part of their plan – cripple Academia as much as possible by cutting them off their resources. It did not hurt that Shun had displayed his ability to fight those Chaos Giants by himself. As a result, Dennis, along with several other people, was a lot more afraid of her brother than in baseline.

“He’s only cutting off Academia’s resources the only way he can. Before the war, he truly enjoyed dueling.” And thanks to their friends across the dimensions and the branches, he still did. But it was not the same as before.

Dennis was still disbelieving. “He really doesn’t look like the type… But, that’s not all you wanted to say, was it?” *He wants to leave…*

"No." *I'm sorry, Dennis.*

She took a deep breath.

"Dennis, do you know what the Academia says about the war?" She did not give him time to answer. "They say that they'll fuse the four dimensions together to create Utopia. But Utopia… Utopia is supposed to be a world without suffering, where everyone will be able to smile freely and have a bright future. How can they make such a world when they bring so much destruction?"

She looked at his straight in the eye. Much to his astonishment, she took out her duel disk and strapped it to her arm.

"Destruction only brings forth despair, and despair brings forth more destruction. But Dennis, your duels can bring smiles to people. They can make the others truly happy! Even if I lost, when we dueled each other in the park that day, I had a lot of fun!"

Dennis stepped back. "Ruri, what are you saying!?"

"Duel me, please. I want to show you that you can still make people smile."

Inwardly, Dennis was panicking. This was *not* according to plan. This was not according to plan *at all*.

What he was supposed to do tonight was meet up with Yuri, lure Ruri away from the Resistance base, and then leave this dimension.

Instead, Yuri was seriously pushing the limits of "fashionably late" and now Ruri had lured *him* away from the base. She started to talk and then…

He loved the days before the invasion. He truly did. Seeing Sakaki Yusho in action, meeting him in person, it was like a revelation to him. It was a duel unlike anything he had seen and experienced before, and it filled his heart with light.

Before he knew it, Dennis along with countless others was completely absorbed by the fireworks and the lights and the tricks and how the man seemed to dance with his own monsters, cheering and yelling with the crowd, at the edge of his seat waiting for the next move.

Sakaki Yusho was more than just a duelist. He was the greatest showman. He was a true master, a figure larger than life. And Dennis wanted to reach that. He wanted to get close to that.

He was told to get a Xyz deck as part of his cover. Dennis hated the prospect. After all, Xyz users would soon be hunted down like animals and war would start. However, he saw it as a necessity, not only to hide more effectively but also to learn their methods.

Then he saw Sakaki Yusho. And suddenly Dennis knew exactly what deck he should get. So he bought his Entermages and never looked back. He almost forgot he had a mission. Almost.

Ruri's words brought back all that.

But the thing she was suggesting…! Use Entertainment dueling to aid the Resistance? Show the Academia that dueling is not a tool for conflict!?

That's… just like Ruri…

And now she demanded a duel… How to deal with this…

Yuri still was not showing up. However, they were far away from any prying eyes. Ruri had backed herself into a corner by bringing him here. *If I win and knock her out, I can then take her to the Professor myself… It'll make for a black spot in both my and Yuri's record, but the mission will be completed!*

He brought out his own duel disk – Xyz style, obviously – and readied it.

"Alright then, Ruri! Let's duel!"

(Ruri: LP – 4000, Hand 5 / Dennis: LP – 4000, Hand 5)

"I'm going first!" said Ruri.

(Turn 1 – Ruri)

She quickly examined her hand.

"When there are no monsters on my field, I can special summon Lyrical Luscinia – Turquoise Warbler from my hand."

(Ruri – Hand 4)

A tiny form made of light fluttered on the field, which soon revealed itself to be a small girl dressed in what appeared to be a green bird costume, if not for her avian legs. Two large but cracked bright blue gemstones decorated her head.

(LV: 1 / ATK: 100)

She took another card from her hand. "When Turquoise Warbler is successfully special summoned, I can special summon another Lyrical Luscinia monster from my hand. I special summon Apatite Dove!"

(Ruri – Hand 3)

Much like the previous monster, the next one was also a tiny girl with bird-like legs, this one in a costume made of soft grey feathers, with her winged hands and forehead decorated in different gemstones, these one transparent but darker with several cracks.

(LV: 1 / ATK: 100)

I've never seen this card before… Then again, he had only dueled Ruri once quite a while ago, so it made sense that he would not know all the cards in her deck.

By now, Ruri was on a roll. "With Apatite Dove's effect, I add another Apatite Dove to my hand."

Yep. Typical Lyrical Luscinia. Nothing to worry about here.

(Ruri – Hand 4)

The looping duelist plucked another card from her hand. "Next, since I control Lyrical Luscinia monsters other than Sapphire Swallow, I can special summon it from my hand!"

(Ruri – Hand 3)

The new card was familiar to Dennis. It was a girl in a tuxedo-like bird costume with dark blue wings for arms and bird-like legs, with clear crystals of matching shade.

(LV: 1 / ATK: 100)

"With the same effect, I can special summon another Lyrical Luscinia monster from my hand. I special summon Cobalt Sparrow!"

(Ruri – Hand 2)

The new girl followed the same pattern as before. She was in a brown and beige fluffy bird costume, with tiny dark blue opaque gemstones forming a necklace and the eyes on her head piece.

(LV: 1 / ATK: 0)

"With Cobalt Sparrow's effect, I can add another Cobalt Sparrow to my hand."

(Ruri – Hand 3)

As Ruri added yet another card to her hand, Dennis started thinking. It was clear as day that she was going for an Xyz summoning, but by now she had four monsters on her field, and had added another two in her hand. And she still had not used her normal summoning. *This is nothing like last time we dueled. She is far more aggressive. Is this the result of the invasion?*

"Finally, I normal summon Zircon Cuckoo!"

And there it is.

(Ruri – Hand 2)

It was another card that Dennis did not know. This one was a noticeably larger girl in a striped grey bird costume decorated with an incredibly bright and clear blue gemstone.

(LV: 1 / ATK: 0)

At this point Ruri had ran out of zones to summon her monsters. On the other hand, an Assembly Nightingale with five materials would be a pain to deal with.

“I overlay Turquoise Warbler, Apatite Dove and Cobalt Sparrow!”

“Huh?” Just three of them?

The three winged girls transformed into masses of solid light in different shades of green to represent their attribute. Simultaneously, a galaxy of golden stars and dark nebulas formed on the broken ground before them.

“Birds with beautiful wings! Gather on the battlefield and take brilliant flight!”

The materials were sucked into the galaxy’s black hole, and it exploded in a pillar of light like a pulsar.

“Xyz Summoning! Dance in the sky! Rank 1; Lyrical Luscinia – Assembly Nightingale!”

Ruri’s ace monster; a beautiful young woman with bird-like legs, and large wings for hands with brilliant feathers in the hues of sunrise, a matching feathered skirt and golden rings on her shoulders that gave her a regal air. The three Overlay Units circled her like green stars.

(RK: 1 / ATK: 0 / OU: 3)

Under the light of her favourite monster, Ruri recited her effects. “Assembly Nightingale gets 100 attack points for every Overlay Unit attached to her, and can attack directly just as many times! Right now I have three, so Assembly Nightingale gets 300 attack points!”

(Assembly Nightingale – ATK: 0 –> 300)

Good thing she can’t attack this turn… But why hasn’t she used her other monsters?

“Next, I overlay Sapphire Swallow and Zircon Cockoo!”

“Eh!?”

Just like before, the two monsters turned into orbs of pulsing green light, and the galaxy formed at Ruri’s feet.

“Bird with wings of the starlit sky, sing a recital of courage for those struggling on the battlefield!”

The pulsar light once again exploded, and a bird spread its wings.

“Xyz Summoning! Dance in the sky! Rank 1; Lyrical Luscinia – Recite Starling!”

“Bird with wings of starlit sky” was an apt description. The new young woman – more like a girl in her late teens, really – had purple skin, and wings and clothes of dark blue feathers with stars etched all over them. Even the golden decorations all over her body and feathers were shaped like stars. Her green Overlay Units almost made for a jarring contrast.

(RK: 1 / ATK: 0 / OU: 2)

Dennis could only watch numb from shock. In all his records of her, Ruri had never summoned two Xyz monsters in one turn. Ever. Not even against Academia. Her deck allowed it, sure, but… This was not in the data.

And neither was this card.

Ruri… what's happening?

Ruri appeared ignorant to Dennis's thoughts. "When Recite Starling is Xyz summoned, I can choose one monster on my field, and that monster gets 300 attack points for every Overlay Unit Recite Starling has attached on her. I choose Recite Starling!"

(Recite Starling – OU: 2 –> 1, ATK: 0 –> 600)

She could have given that boost to Assembly Nightingale… If she did so, she could potentially deal 2700 points of damage with only three attacks. On the other hand, leaving a monster with no ATK on the field was suicide, so giving it the boost was the logical move. But then again, why summon it in the first place?

"I activate Recite Starling's second effect! By detaching one Overlay Unit, I can add a level 1 Winged Beast-type monster from my deck to my hand. I add Lyrical Luscinia – Kyanite Finch."

(Ruri – Hand 3)

Oh. That's *why.* Was she going for a third Xyz summoning? For all he knew, she could be. He had never seen Kyanite Finch before either, so he had no idea what its effect was.

"I end my turn."

Dennis inwardly let a sigh of relief. He had been seriously thinking he would have to deal with three Xyz monsters at once. *Ruri is very aggressive today…!*

"It's my turn! Draw!"

(Turn 2 – Dennis: Hand 6)

"And I'll start things off by special summoning Entermage Wind Sucker!"

(Dennis – Hand 5)

The monster that appeared was a small toy clown with a blue magician's hat, a frilly collar and golden stars all over. It was riding a spherical purple device – also dotted with stars – with a tube like a vacuum cleaner that ended in a trumpet of sorts.

(LV: 5 / ATK: 2100)

Dennis winked. “I can special summon this monster when you have monsters on the field and I don’t. But! When special summoned this way, Wind Sucker looses one of its levels!”

The poor kid clown looked *devastated* as its level was reduced.

(LV: 5 –> 4)

Dennis immediately apologized. “Sorry, sorry!”

Dennis picked another card from his hand. “Since I summoned or special summoned an Entermage monster, I can also summon THIS amazing performer! Come out, Entermage Flimsy Slimmer!”

(Dennis – Hand 4)

It was another clown-like magician, like all Entermage Monsters were, but this one looked like it was made entirely of film reel, and carried a magical staff in its hands. The outfit was completed with a mask and a purple suit jacket, all dotted with stars.

(LV: 4 / ATK: 100)

Ruri braced herself.

“I overlay my level 4 Wind Sucker and my level 4 Flimsy Slimmer!”

Much like Ruri earlier, his monsters turned into masses of light made of green and orange light respectively, and the galaxy formed at his feet. His Xyz energy was nowhere as strong as a duelist’s from the Xyz Dimension, but nobody could tell from the visual effects.

Dennis spread his hands wide, taking in the brilliant display. “SHOW MUST GO ON! Sky magician, travel around the stage magnificently!”

A sharp and elated laugh echoed through the light and tore the gloomy air.

“Xyz Summoning! Appear! Rank 4; Entermage Trapeze Magician!”

What a sight for sore eyes! The mere sight of his magician filled Dennis’s heart with joy. The galaxy erupted and revealed this magnificent acrobat’s form, laughing as he swung in the stage that was this duel, his long red cape fluttering in the wind, and his white suit with its golden stars shining in the non-existent light. The golden Overlay Units only added to its brilliance.

(RK: 4 / ATK: 2500 / OU: 2)

“I activate Trapeze Magician’s effect! During this turn, I can choose one monster on the field, and it can attack twice! I choose Trapeze Magician!”

It was a risky move, especially since Assembly Nightingale would stop one of these attacks, but Dennis didn’t want Recite Starling on the field for much longer. Who knew what other effects that card had in store?

(Trapeze Magician – OU: 2 –> 1)

“Battle! Trapeze Magician, attack Recite Starling!”

And so the Magician danced on the swing hanging from the sky, and with a flourish landed on the dark-feathered lady, shattering her in fragments of light. But right before that…

“Recite Starling’s effect!”

“Huh?” An effect now?

“All battle damage I take involving Recite Starling is also dealt to my opponent!”

“What!?”

(Ruri: 4000 –> 2100)

(Dennis: 4000 –> 2100)

Crap! 1900 points of damage! “That was quite the twist, Ruri! You got me pretty well there! But I still have one more attack left! Trapeze Magician, attack Assembly Nightingale!”

Of course, that’s going to be blocked, but the less Overlay Units it has the better.

Just as expected, Ruri activated her monster’s effect. “Did you forget, Dennis? By detaching one Overlay Unit, Assembly Nightingale cannot be destroyed by battle, and any battle damage I would take becomes zero!”

(Assembly Nightingale – OU: 3 –> 2)

“Yes, but now Assembly Nightingale loses attack!” reminded her Dennis.

(Assembly Nightingale – ATK: 300 –> 200)

And with that, the Battle Phase is over. Dennis looked at the remaining cards in his hand. Two stood out; Attack Nullification and Trick Box.

“I set two cards face-down and end my turn!”

(Dennis – Hand 2)

Now Ruri, how will you deal with this?

Ruri was unfazed. “My turn. I draw!”

(Turn 3 – Ruri: Hand 4)

She took one glance at her card and smiled. *Did she draw something to deal with my Traps?* “Oh! Nice reaction! Did you draw something to help you in a pinch?”

Ruri looked at him straight in the eye, smile firmly in place and confident. “Yes, I did! I activate Rank-Up-Magic Luscinia Force!”

(Ruri – Hand 3)

“WHAT!?” Since when-!?

Ruri smiled even wider. “When I control a Lyrical Luscinia Xyz monster, I can use it as material, and Xyz summon a Lyrical Luscinia monster that’s one rank higher!”

You don’t have to explain THAT!

Assembly Nightingale turned into a green mass of light like the rest, and once again the Xyz galaxy took shape on the ground, sucking the light in.

“Birds with beautiful wings! Gather on the battlefield and sing your cries of indignation!”

Through the pillar of light, a pair of wings unfurled.

“Rank-Up, Xyz Change! Dance in the sky! Rank 2; Lyrical Luscinia – Protest Nightingale!”

The new monster was Assembly Nightingale, but there was something *off* that only became obvious with closer examination. The smile was wiped from her lips. The golden wings on her shoulders were duller, smaller and thicker, with deeper engravings. The pinks and blues of her feathers turned darker, and they looked pointier, and a bit unfurled. Overall, she looked weary, like she had come upon hard times recently. The bright green Overlay Units seemingly restored its previous glow, if only temporarily.

(RK: 2 / ATK: 0 / OU: 3)

“Protest Nightingale…” Since when did Ruri have that?

“When an Xyz monster is successfully summoned with the effect of Luscinia Force, it’s attached as an Overlay Unit to it.”

(Protest Nightingale – OU: 3 –> 4)

“Then, from my graveyard I activate Zircon Cuckoo’s effect! When I successfully special summon a Lyrical Luscinia Xyz monster, I can attach it from the graveyard!”

“Say what!?” Cards that attach themselves to an Xyz monster? In a Lyrical Luscinia deck, this sort of effect could be deadly!

(Protest Nightingale – OU: 4 –> 5)

“Next, Protest Nightingale’s effect! When she’s summoned with an Xyz monster as material, she destroys one Spell or Trap on the field!”

Dennis watched in shock as Trick Box was destroyed. *To think she could Rank-Up her monster, fill it up with Overlay Units, and destroy one of my face-downs in a single move! But*

I still have Attack Nullification. And knowing Assembly Nightingale, he would really need it right now.

“Protest Nightingale gains 200 attack points for every Overlay Unit attached to her, and can attack directly just as many times!”

(Protest Nightingale – ATK: 0 –> 1000)

5000 points of direct damage!

“Battle! Protest Nightingale, attack Dennis directly! The first!” With a mighty flap of her wings, the weary songbird raised a powerful gust of wind, dragging the ash and dust that had littered the ground, creating thick smog.

Like hell! Dennis activated Attack Nullification, but did not announce it. That would only ruin the tension. Instead, he waited until the pollution settled and visibility was restored.

The look on Ruri’s face was priceless.

“Oh, what’s this? Looks like your attack didn’t land! What a shame!”

Ruri’s smiled was restored, though it was a little forced. “Attack Nullification. It ends the Battle Phase. You’re as full of tricks as always, Dennis.”

He winked. “Yes! As an entertainer, I always have a trick up my sleeve!” *Phew! That was close!* If Ruri had destroyed that card instead of Trick Box, the duel would be over this turn.

That Protest Nightingale really came out of nowhere… Fortunately, Ruri’s hand still compromised of three monsters, so he didn’t have any facedowns to worry about. He just hoped that Apatite Dove and Kyanite Finch did not have any hidden nasty effects like that Cuckoo just now.

Ruri looked a bit displeased, though she hid it well. “I end my turn.”

“Thank you~! Now it’s my turn! Draw!”

(Turn 4 – Dennis: Hand 3)

He looked at his drawn card. *Perfect.* “First, I set a card face-down.”

(Dennis – Hand 2)

“Battle! Trapeze Magician, attack Protest Nightingale!” It probably would not do anything, but he had to get rid of those Overlay Units.

“I activate Protest Nightingale’s effect! By detaching one Overlay Unit, I can negate both battle damage and destruction!” Dennis opened his mouth to reply, but the girl was not done. “And then! Half of the negated damage is dealt to you as effect damage!”

(Protest Nightingale – OU: 5 –> 4)

Oh! That *would* have been nasty, but… "Trapeze Magician's effect negates all effect damage less than its attack!" And the effect damage just now would have been 750 points, which was way below Trapeze's 2500 ATK. "Nice try, but too bad!"

Ruri was not happy. "Since Protest has one less Overlay Unit, her attack drops."

(Protest Nightingale – ATK: 1000 –> 800)

I wasn't able to deal any damage, but not too bad.

"I end my turn."

Ruri steeled herself. *It really comes down to luck of the draw, doesn't it?* "It's my turn. Draw!"

(Turn 4 – Ruri: Hand 4)

She placed the card in her hand. "Battle!"

Nope. Dennis revealed the card he had drawn earlier. "I activate my face-down! Continuous Trap, Magical Fortress!"

The card art revealed an ominous black castle with clawed hands emerging from its gates and spiky vines all over, with the sky overcast by thick purple clouds.

Ruri took a step back in shock. "What!?"

"When I control a Spellcaster-type monster, you cannot declare an attack. Safe again!"

"Bag full of tricks indeed… I place one card face-down and end my turn."

(Ruri – Hand 3)

"A face-down when you're stuck! Let's see if it'll be the magic trick you need to turn this around! It's my turn! I draw!"

(Turn 5 – Dennis: Hand 3)

Just what he needed! "I activate the Continuous Spell, Burn Gift!" Before Dennis appeared a metallic box with a golden skull etched on it.

(Dennis – Hand 2)

"Allow me to explain! With its effect, I can special summon a level four or below FIRE attribute monster on *your* side of the field!"

Ruri's reaction was exactly what he hoped it'd be. "*My* side!?"

"Please make way for my dear little friend; Entermage Plushfire!"

(Dennis – Hand 1)

The box opened and with a dance of sparks emerged one of the most adorable cards in Dennis's deck, according to his totally unbiased opinion. Plushfire was literally a flame-shaped plush toy with button eyes and large stitches coming out of a wizard hat decorated with stars, munching on a multicoloured fuse like a lollipop. It even had huge pink cheeks sewed in.

The monster hoped over next to Protest Nightingale and made itself comfortable.

(LV: 4 / ATK: 1000)

Ruri was stunned. She kept glancing between Dennis and the monster on her field, not knowing what to make out of this. Even *Protest* seemed confused.

"Cute, isn't it?"

"H-huh? Y-yes."

Plushfire preened under all the attention. Dennis giggled. This was so cute. Too bad he would have to cut it short.

"Battle! Trapeze Magician, attack Plushfire!"

The plush toy freaked out. And so did Ruri.

"You only summoned it on my field to have an attack target!?"

The sight was comical; Trapeze Magician performed his majestic routine, only to land on a panicking plush toy with a squeak. However, any amusement he may have drawn from it was wiped an instant later. Plushfire exploded with a burst of fire, catching Ruri in the blast. Protest instantly kneeled down and hugged her controller, shielding her from the worst of it, and saving her from any nasty burns.

"Thank you, Protest…"

(Ruri: 2100 –> 600)

"Next, I activate Burn Gift's effect!"

Ruri peeped out of her monster's wings. "Eh?"

It would be rude to keep her waiting. "When the monster summoned by its effect leaves the field, this card gets destroyed, and deals you 400 points of damage!"

The flaming box exploded, shrapnel flying high.

"I won't let you! I activate my face-down! Continuous Trap, Lyrical Luscinia – Flock Cloud!"

Flock Cloud?

Ruri fully revealed herself from her Protest's wings, proudly displaying the trap depicting a giant flock of birds in the sky.

"When I'm about to take either effect damage, or damage from a direct attack, I can detach an Overlay Unit from a Lyrical Luscinia monster I control, and that damage becomes zero!"

(Protest Nightingale – OU: 4 –> 3)

Much like the card art, a gigantic flock of songbirds materialized and hid Ruri completely from view, shielding her against the explosion.

"But Protest loses attack" reminded her Dennis.

(Protest Nightingale – ATK: 800 –> 600)

A trap that protects her from damage, huh? With Nightingale's effect – both of them – Ruri was protected from battle involving her monsters. This trap made sure that she covered her other areas as well, stopping the opponent dead in their tracks, as long as she had Overlay Units to spare.

Unfortunately, I can't use Plushfire's effect to my advantage, but I still dealt a fair bit of damage.

"I end my turn."

Ruri's face was glistening with sweat – was it from the exertion, the sudden heat, or the nerves?

"It's my turn. I draw!"

(Turn 6 – Ruri: Hand 4)

She took a long look at the card she drew. "I activate the Spell card Jammed Reload."

(Ruri – Hand 3)

Dennis stared in confusion. The card depicted someone loading bullets on a gun with the safety still turned on.

"With this effect, I can discard up to three level 1 monsters, and draw the same number of cards from my deck. However, I can't activate the effects of any of the cards I draw during this turn."

Normally, this would be pretty powerful card, but in this situation, it was a huge gamble. Ruri sent all three of her cards in her graveyard, and placed her hand on her deck. She closed her eyes.

She's… really praying…

Praying to their decks… Academia did not do that. Their decks were specifically constructed for optimal chances at drawing the necessary cards. It was a mechanical approach necessary for an army.

Here in the Xyz Dimension, Dennis had learned that decks had a life of their own. When he picked up Trapeze Magician, something answered back. He was sure of it. His deck was always trying to tell him something. It would always give back. And after the invasion, Dennis would see countless duelists silently praying for a card that would save the day, the light of hope in their eyes when their decks gave them exactly what they needed.

"I draw!"

And by that exact light, Dennis knew that Ruri had drawn exactly what she needed.

"With the effect of Magical Fortress, I can't attack, so I set two cards face-down and end my turn."

(Ruri – Hand 1)

Dennis now was far more troubled. *Two face-downs? What in the world did she draw?* Well, he would not get that answer if he did nothing.

"My turn. I draw!"

(Turn 7 – Dennis: Hand 2)

Not much he could do. *Still, I should try to wear down Protest as much as possible. If she blocks this attack, Protest will be left with only two Overlay Units.* "Battle! Trapeze Magician, attack Protest Nightingale!"

Instead of grabbing the card beneath her monster, Ruri pressed an icon on her duel disk, and one of her face-down cards revealed itself. "Quick-play Spell, Rank-Up-Magic Escape Force!"

Dennis stumbled. "*Another* Rank-Up!?"

"When an Xyz monster I control is targeted for an attack, I can negate it, and then I can use the targeted monster as material to Xyz summon a monster that's one rank higher!"

Trapeze Magician was stopped in his tracks, and Protest Nightingale turned into a comet of green light diving straight into the galaxy of the Xyz Dimension.

"Birds with beautiful wings! Gather and with your cries raise a storm against oppression!"

And so a mighty cry from a beautiful voice rang clear through the air, and Dennis could do nothing but admire it.

"Rank-Up, Xyz Change! Dance in the sky! Rank 3; Lyrical Luscinia – Riot Nightingale!"

She was harder. Darker. The gold had dulled even further. The beak of her headpiece and her talons were sharper. The pinks and blues were now of a very dark shade that reflected no light, and the peach shades had nearly whitened out. Her feathers were even more ruffled, and the shoulder pieces were now angled in shape and narrower. Not even the light from her Overlay Units could salvage her lost beauty. She had been in a fight, a nasty one.

(RK: 3 / ATK: 0 / OU: 4)

"From my hand, Zircon Cuckoo's effect. It attaches itself to summoned Xyz monster." Dennis blinked. *That effect activates from the hand too!?*

(Ruri – Hand 0)

(Riot Nightingale – OU: 4 –> 5)

"Riot's effect. When summoned using an Xyz monster as material, she destroys two Spells or Traps on the field."

"Magical Fortress… Wait, that's the only card in my Spell and Trap zone!" Ruri did not blink even as Flock Cloud on her side was destroyed.

"Finally, Riot Nightingale gets 300 attack points for every Overlay Unit attached to her."

(Riot Nightingale – ATK: 0 –> 1500)

Dennis was astonished. *She even destroyed her own card… And she barely even flinched. Ruri, what's wrong with you?*

"Assembly… Protest… Now Riot…" It was like watching Kurosaki Shun all over again.

She can't possibly know… can she?

Dennis shook his head. He could not let the sudden appearance of a monster he did not know shake him.

"I activate Trapeze Magician's effect! By detaching one Overlay Unit, I can target a monster and that monster can attack twice this turn!"

(Trapeze Magician – OU: 1 –> 0)

"Even if you do, Riot Nightingale can stop that attack" replied Ruri.

"I suspected as much" admitted Dennis. "That's why I'm targeting Riot Nightingale!"

Ruri blinked in surprise. "Why would you target *her*?"

Dennis smiled grimly. He did not like relying on this effect of his Magician, as it took away from the spectacle, but… "If the monster targeted by Trapeze Magician's effect cannot attack this turn, it gets destroyed at the end of the Battle Phase."

“Oh. Well, anyway, it won’t work.”

Huh? “It won’t work…?”

“When Zircon Cuckoo is attached as an Overlay Unit to an Xyz monster, that monster cannot be targeted by my opponent’s card effects.”

“What!? In that case…”

Ruri smiled, but there was nothing happy about that. “You just wasted an Overlay Unit.”

That was the least of it. The last remaining cards on Dennis’s hand were Entermage Reversal Dancer and Pinch Breaker. He could have summoned Reversal Dancer and set Pinch Breaker, so that next turn he could reduce Riot’s ATK to a mere 100 points. However, if she could not be targeted by effects, that combo would not work.

In other words… there was nothing he could do.

“I end my turn.”

And with that, he knew he lost.

And so did Ruri.

“It’s my turn. I draw.”

(Turn 8 – Ruri: Hand 1)

She did not even look at the card she drew.

She took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry, Dennis. But this is for you.”

For me?

“Riot Nightingale…”

The young woman raised her wings, and powerful gusts of wind started to gather beneath, raising a cloud of ash and shrapnel. Dennis could feel it making tiny cuts all over his exposed skin.

“Direct attack!”

An impact. Powerful. Crushing. It blew him back. He knocked his head against something. It was cold. Then hot. Then wet.

I lost…

Then dark.

Yuto heard a sharp whistle coming from another spot on the dome. Shun found another hatch.

They should have seen this coming. Instead of having a few large hatches that could possibly fit a person, the base had multiple tiny hatches that could only fit a bird. They could still use them for their plan to smoke out the people inside, but they did not help with the "get in" part in the slightest.

Yuto crawled over to where Shun was and cast another *Reducto* at the mechanism inside. It worked instantly.

The Phantom Knights user did not really need his wand for this; he could easily call his power and everything he chose would disintegrate. But that would be detected, and they could not afford that.

In fact, even now there was a huge risk of detection. If Shun and Yuto were reckless, somebody inside would notice that all their air ducts stopped working all of a sudden. Then they would send somebody outside to check and they'd be screwed. They had to make it look like technical damage than an assault.

A message came to his duel disk. Yuto opened it, with Shun peeping over his shoulder.

"I won. He's out. Be there in three."

The two duelists exchanged a glance. *"Roger."*

They had to get this done quickly. Shun turned to Yuto. "I'll set the Traps. You do the rest."

Yuto stared at him. "We're supposed to make it look like an accident."

"We don't have time."

Yuto did not like this, but his friend was right. "Okay."

By "Traps" Shun meant Omnipotent Landmine Glaymore, more widely known as Widespread Ruin. He heard it was this Trap that took out Barrett's eye in baseline and killed all his men. He could not deny its effectiveness.

Still…

"Edo can take it. He's the Commander-in-Chief for a reason."

He knew that, it was the foot soldiers he was worried about.

"Really? You should be used to this by now."

Yuto did NOT want to start *that* conversation. Instead he kept on working.

In the distance, he spotted Ruri on Assembly Nightingale flying at top speed. They were out of time.

“You know what, Yuto? Forget subtlety. Just get this done.”

“You tell the others.”

Yuto called upon his power. The blue aura surrounded his body, the evil black miasma long gone. He heard Dark Rebellion's roar in his mind, the lightning build up at his fingertips. The Xyz energy readings inside were probably off the charts.

Shun was yelling at him. “YUTO, WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?”

“RURI IS HERE! GET ON HIGH GROUND!”

Ruri was yelling in the distance, he could hear her. Shun summoned Rise Falcon and jumped on its back.

NOW!

“Revolt of Lightning, DISOBEY!”

If one was observing from a distance, they would probably see the entire dome of steel glowing purple as if from an inner light before lightning overtook everything and the area filled with smoke.

“Please don’t tell me you ruined the equipment.”

“I didn’t.” He was sure of it. And his proof were the blaring alarms immediately afterwards. *“I only destroyed the ventilation systems and the lights.”*

Yuto activated his duel disk and turned on a heat detector again, and scanned the ground through the smoke. It appeared that the soldiers came out of the base first. Much to Yuto’s satisfaction, there were far less than they normally would be. Kaito’s distraction was working as intended. Those were shortly followed by the yelling scientists.

In the chaos, nobody noticed Ruri arriving. She dismissed her monsters, gently laying the unconscious Dennis on the cold metal. Shun landed right next to them. He only spared a glance to the unconscious spy.

“He has a concussion” reported Ruri. “He also scrapped his head pretty badly, but nothing lasting.” Yuto repeated all this to Yuri.

“It better not be lasting” came Yuri’s response through the mind link. *“We didn’t go through all that effort just for Dennis to end up with brain damage.”*

Yuto agreed, but his co-anchor could have phrased that a little better. Ruri tried her best. He could feel Yuri trying very hard not to say something snarky in response.

Shun snapped him out of it, as always. “Get in now, before they find the mines and rush back in.”

The three nodded in agreement. With the smoke as a cover, and the gates wide open, sneaking in the base was easy. Shun set a few more Trap-mines behind them just in case. He then activated the heat-seeking program again.

“Somebody’s in here.” The message was unspoken. One of them should go ahead. They exchanged a few glances. Eventually, Shun nodded and rushed in.

Ruri could not go because she was supposed to be uninvolved in all this. Yuto could not go because he was the only line of communication with the guys on the other side. Which left Shun.

The two slung Dennis over their shoulders and rushed to the basement.

Eating digital food was weird.

Even in baseline, SOL Technologies had tried their very best to make all senses as accurate as possible, taste included. After the reboot, many cafés and restaurants had opened in VRAINS, and many duelists loved to hang out there.

Playmaker had not had many chances to sit down and try them, but the few times he did he found that he did not like it very much. Sure, the taste of the ice cream or the coffee was what he’d expect ice cream or coffee to taste like. However it was exactly that; predictable. Not to mention, in more recent loops he could also taste *the programming* that went into making these, which made the experience far more jarring.

Of course, he could not begrudge Ai for grabbing every chance he could get to eat something. So when Ai offered to discuss their current situation over dessert, Playmaker could not refuse him.

It was another surreal experience for him. Sitting out in the open like he was a nobody. Not that he was worried about being watched. Ai had taken care of that.

He was in human form. Perhaps to make it easier to blend in with the crowd. But Ai would never do something for a reason as mechanic as that. That was Playmaker’s way of thinking. Playmaker had no idea what Ai was thinking about this. Perhaps not even Ai knew.

“Did you hear? There are two Charisma Duels scheduled today. But, who’s going to duel is a surprise.”

Playmaker flashed back to a memory from just earlier today. “I heard.”

“Hm? Something wrong?”

Playmaker took a deep breath. “I found Jin.”

Ai blinked in surprise. “Huh? *Kusanagi* Jin? *Here?*”

Playmaker shook his head. “He was manning Café Nagi. Kusanagi-san was not there. And I ran into this old man while here…”

“An old man in VRAINS? Oh well, we can talk about that stuff later.”

Playmaker was caught off-guard. “*Later*?”

Ai pointed to the screen outside. “Look, it’s starting.”

Playmaker looked at the screen and saw an announcer shouting something about the Charisma Duelists. Playmaker was annoyed. “That’s not important right now.”

“Oh, but it is!”

“How.”

“Well, I found out who the surprise Charisma duelists are. I think you’ll find it interesting too.”

Playmaker decided to indulge his companion, so he took a sip of his coffee and turned to the screen again.

“Hello, my blue fans! Are you all tuned in?”

“Hope your hearts are all fired up! Because this match is going to get WHITE HOT!”

He stared. “This can’t…”

“It is.”

The duel was Blue Angel versus Soul Burner.

Chapter End Notes

Hoo boy. Where do I even start with this chapter. First, at over 9.800 words, it's the longest I've ever written. Second, it was completely unplanned. Initially I wanted to pick up from where I left the previous chapter, but then that first line kind of wrote itself. The duel was another massive headache.

First, I had to make a whole bunch of original cards for Ruri, because there are simply not enough cards for a Lyrical Luscinia deck. The full list is posted on spacebattles along with their full effects. Listing the whole thing here would take way too long, and some of these cards didn't show up anyway. Kettou and kr helped a lot there. For the record, all the original main deck monsters are named after blue gemstones. As for the Rank-Up chain, it had been in my mind for a while. There's also a Rank 4... which I hope you get to see in the future.

Dennis's deck was an even bigger challenge. Performage without using Pendulum? I asked in the YGO wikia and got laughed at. The eventual deck is... interesting, but this

chapter doesn't show the exact reasons why, so I won't bother you with it. The point is, it worked, and I had to resist from going back to that wiki and rub it to their faces.

Then was the duel itself. By the time I completed the decks, I was too drained to write the duel so Kettou offered, and being the incredibly fast worker that he is, he presented a full duel in under two hours. However in his hurry he misread several card effects and stats, both original and existing, so we spend the next three or so days fixing one mistake and finding another. We ran into a few roadblocks, but I think the eventual result was satisfactory for both of us.

And the ending! At first it was supposed to be the start of the new chapter, but oh well. I hope you liked the little twist in the end!

Also, I can't believe the response this got. I must be the first to post loop stories on AO3, and they have been dying out the last couple of years, but there are still readers! Thank you!

Please, read and review!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!